



Spelling bee: Cher, Sarandon and Pfeiffer get down to cursing

Could It Be . . . Satan?

THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK Directed by George Miller
Screenplay by Michael Cristofer

Andrew Wyeth might summer there. Bob Newhart could run the colonial inn. Eastwick—it looks like a travel poster for the New England dream. It surely boasts a trio of dream girls: Alexandra (Cher), who sculpts clay Earth Mothers; Jane (Susan Sarandon), who cues the school band with a hearty “Horns up!”; and Sukie (Michelle Pfeiffer), abustle with her six kids. All are displaced, not quite fulfilled by their evenings together swapping naughty secrets. And when this comely sorority is restless, Eastwick suffers, with plagues of sudden storms and cherry pits. The women are witches, you see. And now they dare to pray for the perfect man to save them from rural rectitude: “a tall, dark prince traveling under a curse.” Worse luck for the witches, they get him.

Daryl Van Horne (Jack Nicholson), a newcomer to Eastwick, is everything the women crave, fear, pity, hate. He is, in other words, a man. In public, he snores like a boar. His jokes smell, and he does too. He is, he admits with the grin of a baby Hitler,

“just your average horny little devil.” With a capital *D*. Big Bad Beelzebub. But devilry in New England is not what it used to be. Women suspected of having sex with Satan are not burned at the stake; they are snubbed in the check-out line. And in an age when even witches are feminists, a sexist like Daryl doesn’t stand a chance.

John Updike, on whose lovely, wicked novel this film is based, is alert to the minutest shifts in a suburbanite’s emotional barometer. George Miller, director of the wondrously violent *Mad Max* movies, sneezes and blows a typhoon. At first it seems a mix of two unsuited masters. And anyone who comes to *The Witches of Eastwick* expecting a *Masterpiece Theatre* adaptation will be disappointed, not to say grossed out. Alex wakes up in a bed of snakes; puke spumes as if from a seasick sewer pipe. No problem. Miller and Michael Cristofer have simply chosen to tell the story from coarse Daryl’s point of view rather than, as Updike did, from the ironic women’s. This is not a movie of compound-complex sentences and nuances. But it is a damned entertaining one, with a textbook display of camerabatics—if textbooks were comic books with a mean streak.

The performances are in perfect high pitch. Cher and her screen sisters all catch the edge of flinty, frantic resilience; these three could bewitch any prospective devil. There are nifty turns from Veronica Cartwright (as the local prude) and Helen Lloyd Breed (as a sprightly oldster). Then there’s Nicholson. Well! He might have been rehearsing for this role ever since *The Shining*. If he was over the top there, he is stratospheric here. He is a beast on two legs, grunting, slaving, pawing anyone, and never mind the scratches. Does Jack stink like Daryl? No, he is gloriously rank. Sulfuric, in fact.

—By Richard Corliss

Zitskrieg

THE BELIEVERS

Directed by John Schlesinger
Screenplay by Mark Frost

An innocent child possessed by the devil. A shark with a strange taste for shallow waters (and careless swimmers). An actor willing to sell his soul in exchange for a decent role. A good horror movie can be outlined in a sentence.

The Believers, a movie doing its best to defy description at any length, has some potential in this regard. It posits a Caribbean voodoo cult that offers unlimited worldly power to people willing to sacrifice their young sons in its rituals. And it brings a newly widowed father (Martin Sheen) and his son (Harley Cross) into menacing proximity with the evildoers. A well-made horror film would focus tightly on the son’s menaced innocence and force us to share the father’s fears as the portents of doom gather about him, his ferocity when at last he must defend his child.

But Mark Frost’s script is abuzz with distractions, and John Schlesinger’s direction is puttery and fussy. That boldness of style and pace that can distract the audience from the improbabilities always inherent in this genre is quite beyond him. It is rather late in the picture before the filmmakers briefly get their act together. For no very good reason, the meanies decide to visit upon the heroine, Helen Shaver, a humongous zit. Far beyond the curative powers of even the large-economy-size Clearasil, this ever growing pimple symbolizes the worst social nightmares of the adolescents who are the prime audience for occult nonsense, especially since—*eeuuu!*—popping it turns out to be worse than living with it. The sequence is simply and efficiently done, and the film’s prevailing mood—a hopeless desire to pat everything into plausibility—is abandoned. If *The Believers* could have done for father love what it does for acne anxiety, its creators might have had something here.

—By Richard Schickel



Would you accept flowers from this man?



Sheen holds Cross in *The Believers*